

Friends Forever!

By Neil Cramb



Her beautiful lines will turn heads wherever she goes. INSET. The functional, light and airy saloon.

There are very few people one meets who have the luxury of being able to indulge their passion; who can comfortably attest that they are doing what they would like to do in life. JJ Provoyeur is one of those elite few. He is a quiet, reserved gentleman with incredibly sharp eyes which overlook no detail. His quiet reserve is deferential, and he speaks softly as I intrude into the private space of his latest project which was recently christened *Friends Forever*.

In amongst the gently sloping foothills of the mountains near Stellenbosch he seems completely part of the 'terroir' which produces exquisitely complex red wines. He and his partners have engineered one of the Cape's loveliest golf estates in this idyllic part of the country, and except for a chance event over a decade ago, one would likely see JJ attending to the business of developing the Devonvale Estate nowadays, rather than coordinating the final details of an 18-month boat building project with military accuracy.

"I've built lots of plywood boats and the idea of a large, light catamaran has always appealed to me" he said.

Since he started racing keelboats at the end of the field dominated by international sailors, JJ has always been a compulsive fiddler. Not an idle tinkerer, mind you, but a seasoned racer and boatbuilder who can see the underlying good in a yacht, rebuild the whole boat and emerge with a giant-killing machine which boxes several divisions above its class.

In 2006 JJ was racing one of his many 'project' boats two-up in the Cape-to-Salvador Race with his old crewmate Anthony

Spillebeen, having taken an existing race boat and optimising it for the demands of two-handed ocean racing. The story goes that the intention was to sail to South America, head up to the Caribbean, lay the boat up for hurricane season and return the following year to race the Caribbean circuit, and heading slowly north from there. In early 2006 JJ was in the Power Marine Yard in Trinidad and happened to bump into Phil Harvey, another chance occurrence which started the whole process in motion. Phil had completed, as his own boat, a 55' Dudley Dix design and invited JJ to see his work, and roughly then the seed was sown in JJ's mind.

"I built my last wooden Sonnet sometime in 1994, and in 1995 I sold my boat building business at the head of the Marina" JJ explained on a crisply clear morning as we were surrounded by riggers busy stepping his 22m aluminium mast. The Harvey/Dix collaboration was one of those projects which JJ couldn't erase from his mind, so his wife Esther decided to put an end to her husband's torment for his 60th birthday. She persuaded his dearest friends to contribute to the project, and she presented JJ with the folio of Dudley Dix's DH550 at his birthday party. JJ's boat building itch has never been successfully cured, and in his business partner he has found a wonderful synergy. His partner doesn't build boats, but he shares JJ's love of sailing, whilst JJ invests his wealth of experience into the creative side of the project.

Their latest collaboration means that JJ would build and deliver the DH550, whilst his partner would actually be buying one of the loveliest new boats in South Africa built by some of the most experienced craftsmen

around today. To help him build the vessel, JJ roped in Richard 'Thirsty' Bertie, another of JJ's sailing mates, with huge experience building large multihulls as well as very high-tech composite boat builds. Richard and JJ have a relationship going back decades, and it was Bertie, from a boat building family in Cape Town, who introduced a young Provoyeur to keelboat sailing in the first place, and the pair have produced literally hundreds of boats in their separate capacities.

Building a 55' wooden catamaran is just a scaled up application of what JJ knows best. Worked from a concept by Phil Harvey and Dudley Dix, one of the foremost plywood designers around today, the DH550 is a mixture of Dudley's experience with light strong aircraft-style plywood building and Phil's requirement for a high-volume easily-driven boat which is easy to sail and above all simple to control. JJ recognised the brilliant essence in the design when he first saw Phil's boat in the Caribbean, and the twinkle in his eye became apparent as he guided me through the forward cockpit of his new boat. JJ has adopted all the versatility which plywood building offers, and all his personality has been poured into his latest project.

Why the DH550?

For years the typical image of a plywood catamaran has been a pair of Polynesian war-canoes lashed together or of slab-sided packing-crates with obscene points, devoid of curves and as sprightly as... well... a packing-crate.

As a Westlawn graduate, Dudley Dix mastered the nuances of stressed-ply building when he was building his own designs back in the 1980s, and *Friends Forever* is the



The boat that JJ built! A clear view of the boat prior to transport and launching.



JJ provoyeur.

culmination of those techniques as delivered by the hands of Messrs Provoyeur et al.

Creating a large rigid platform nearly 17m long out of an organic material is a big ask. Plywood is a peculiar material in that its bend characteristics are almost linear and superior to natural wood only by virtue of its construction. But give it multi-dimensional stress to wrap it into the sleek shapes of the DH550 and it behaves very differently. Dudley and JJ have used a lot of the same thinking as the pioneers of monocoque car bodybuilders used; flat panels given slight deformation on a second axis

make for rigid skins which easily span the four or five metres of a body panel, whilst Dudley's proven radius-chine method uses essentially a cold-moulding technique to underwater contours where plywood would otherwise make it impossible.

To achieve the complex curves with which the DH550 bewitches the viewer, JJ and Richard have used a very simple construction with several fairly complicated plywood bulkheads spanned by Western Red Cedar stringers notched and filleted into the frames. After chatting to JJ you get a realisation of the depth of

his experience, because it's in the simple details of construction that he shows his mastery. Tying the slow curves of the deck panels across two or three sheets of plywood in some cases, he and Richard realised that their efforts were being thwarted by the hard points of the bulkheads so that the ply was kinking over the set positions of the bulkheads. The solution was to cap the bulkheads and frames with a filleted crown, turning the already rigid bulkhead into a girder construction, and providing a flat plane over which to stress the plywood skin. The significant areas of jigsaw-puzzle jointed panels are now

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Admiring his handiwork and making 'friends forever'.

luxuriously draped over engineered bulkheads with T-shaped edges and the outer shell of the project is seamless and devoid of telltale hard spots.

Another interesting point which JJ brought out is the complete lack of superfluous epoxy glass. The construction of the DH550 has used epoxy skinning only in below-water areas where the concept has been to use composites to spread point-loading under the keel, and to afford abrasion-resistance to the bottom so the yacht can be easily and safely beached. The monocoque skin-over-frame build takes care of the rest of the structural rigidity with nearly no other composite use except a carbon epoxy skin over the main crossbeam.

Here the Bertie/Provoyeur team have gone back to first principals and used the plywood and solid timber as a kind of core beneath

the composite work; nowhere have they even dabbled with shaped foam or anything similarly space-age. They have only deferred to the use of carbon in places where it makes absolute sense like the roving chainplates where carbon filaments are wound round knuckles to receive the shroud toggle pins. The carbon fibres organically spread the loads over wider areas of the shroud base than any other solution, and even traditional solutions like through-bolting metal chainplates are outmoded with elegant solutions like those used on the DH550.

Simple wholesome carpentry is evident everywhere, and once one peeks into the telling places like the sheer and deck-joints the incredible detail underlying the project begins to show. The sheer clamp is a solid stringer of South American Mahogany, grainless as a stick of toffee, and it swoops along between the topsides and the deck, rebated to tie the two skins together. The solid timber accepts the constantly changing geometry of the deck line and hull curvature whilst the stringers above and below the edge are all double-filletted Cedar. All the joints where the stringers penetrate the frames and bulkheads have been filletted in every possible corner so the radii, with their glass covering to spread loads as far as possible, give the corners and all the nooks and crannies where timber and ply meet, a very smooth sculpted look.

I said to JJ that the project must have been a wood-watcher's dream before the boat was finally painted, and he assured me otherwise: the filletting had been done with such attention to detail that all the joinery was completely covered over, faired and finished before painting commenced.

Friends Forever is a modern take on cruising catamarans. She weighed in at a touch over 13 tons with half-full tanks, furnishings, all the galley accessories, and systems in place, and with her rig and all her cruising requirements she should still be well under 14 tons. JJ, in typically canny fashion about the rig when he learned that the original 21m mast meant that 1m of section was discarded in the build. He asked for the extra 1m to remain on the rig, so that *Friends Forever* sports an extra metre of unstayed loft, and her sailplan is ever so slightly more graceful. The rig is a sensible cruising rig with a slim 400mm of square top on the main and no screecher. JJ is in no way reticent about the expected speed of his new creation, and with the idea for the owner to be able to enjoy shorthanded sailing with a few guests and JJ as the skipper, he is completely confident that the yacht will be able to cruise effortlessly in as-built mode with a complement of two.

She's built with her business lounge forward of the main bulkhead which spans the whole deck saloon; here at the base of the mast all the rigging is led to a series of electric Lewmars and a battery of clutches. The double-bridle mainsheet is led here, along with the self-tacking jib and the spinnaker sheets, so there is literally no need to leave the sailing cockpit at all, and the main steering position is directly behind the mast with a wheel in the cockpit, and its mirror in the saloon, both on a common shaft.

Forward of the working cockpit is a retinue of accessible storage hatches - big bins in the bridgedeck which house the windlass,

tankage and storage for sails and the like, so nothing needs to be brought below through the accommodation.

The full-width main saloon is expansive and light, with an equally generous aft cockpit opening through magnificent stainless sliding doors. Salie Jacobs, of the boat building brothers, has done all JJ's stainless work and the custom finish is truly breathtakingly brilliant. Tilting sash windows open the area for tropical ventilation, whilst the vertical forward end of the saloon means that the headroom throughout is cathedral-like.

Everything has a sense of scale on this boat, and the voluminous space is taken with handsome allocations of luxuriously-sized equipment. The refrigerated storage is cavernous: stainless fridges and freezers are tucked under the galley worktops and they partner with the monstrous range which befits a modern home. No chef aboard *Friends Forever* is ever going to be short of stove space! The galley adjoins a freestyle bar/eating area which is designed with similarly sumptuous storage. Here the drawers run on formica runners which are probably 50-year-old technology, and which are still proving unbeatable after a half-century.

"I don't want any hassles when I'm sailing, so everything is being kept simple" is how JJ puts details like this.

Floor treatment and timber trim is the same throughout: pure simple Joubert French marine-ply has been allowed to remain in view. The timber facing is as pure and decorative as Crown Sapele or Teak, but because it's part of the yacht's structure there is no need for additional carpentry or cabinetry- everything which makes up the essence of JJ's project is clearly visible and flawlessly executed. Even the simple details like the joinery which isn't plywood has been thoughtfully done. The saloon companionways have recessed handrails let into the bulkheads like slotted cave lockers with a shipshape trim around them. A very personal Provoyeur touch, and JJ explains that the solution means that standard sized domestic appliances can fit down the stairs without interference.

The flat bilges, all flawlessly painted are hidden beneath floorboards fitted like marquetry. It's a simple matter to pry one up, then the rest all jigsaw into place and locate each other. Plumbing and piping has all been kept as unobtrusive as possible- a massive watermaker and twin airconditioners are kept powered by a Westerbeke generator, and like everything else, including the twin Volvo diesels commanded by a Glendinning fly-by-wire control, everything is optimally installed.

The watermaker and genset are set at workbench-height with lockers for spares close by, and sited up forward are well away from the accommodation.

JJ points out a very lovely Arts & Crafts coffee table forming the centre of the saloon seating. It's not the spawn of some trendy little Sandton boutique; it's part of the original changeroom furniture from Devonvale, recaptured and trained into a new purpose, like the doorframes which were timbers salvaged from the original farm.

There's been a lot of care lavished over *Friends Forever*. Lots of experience, too. For JJ and Esther too, a huge amount of happy memories are about to be made. ↓

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